

“The Prairies A-Blaze”

Iowa Wide Awakes Carry Torches for Lincoln

by Floyd and Marion Reinhart

In photographs, it is said, the dead laugh and wave at us. In this rare image, however, a stiff and serious young man stares at us. He holds a long-handled torch with a flag attached, its faint letters arching through the stripes. As indicated by his uniform and flag, this anonymous young man was one of several thousand across the nation who, with great enthusiasm, joined with brigades of other men called “Wide Awakes,” to support Republican candidate Abraham Lincoln in the volatile presidential campaign of 1860.

Perhaps the young man’s expression indicates the seriousness of that election: a civil war and the dissolution of a nation lay ahead. Or perhaps his serious look was part of holding still long enough for this “ambrotype” to be properly exposed directly on glass. The glass was then backed with dark cloth, paper, paint, or varnish, much like a mirror. As the 1860 campaign ended, so did the use of the heavy, fragile ambrotypes, passed over for cheaper and less fragile alternatives of tintypes (images on sheet metal) and prints from glass plate negatives, which were also developed in that decade.

Although there is little information regarding this young man

(the ambrotype was found in 1964 in Green Lane, Pennsylvania), the picture itself provides some clues. We know, for instance, that torchlight parades were a common feature of American political campaigns for most of the 19th century and that the American flag attached to this man’s torch pole was obviously a campaign sign. That it was promoting Abraham Lincoln and his vice-presidential running mate, Hannibal Hamlin, dates it precisely to the 1860 election. That the sign also promotes “Congressman S. R. Curtis” on the bottom line places it in the southeast congressional district of Iowa. In 1860, Congressman Samuel Ryan Curtis was running for his third term out of Keokuk. The young man in the ambrotype, therefore, was probably an Iowa Wide Awake from the Keokuk area.

But not necessarily. The marching clubs known as Wide Awakes were not a uniquely Iowa phenomenon. The Wide Awakes originated in Hartford, Connecticut. There, ardent young Republican men had gathered to escort Cassius Clay, the famous southern abolitionist, to a lecture hall on February 25, 1860. The young men formed a torchlight parade, and to protect their clothing from the dripping oil lamps, they wore caps and capes of glazed cloth. Return-

ing from the hall that night, one of the young men was attacked by a sturdy and determined Democrat, but a blow from a Republican’s oil lamp stretched the assailant out on the ground.

Resolved to combat Democratic interference in their rallies, the 36 Hartford men met on March 3 and organized the original Wide Awake club. They adopted a glazed-cloth cape and cap, along with an oil torch, as their standard uniform. Two days later, they escorted Abraham Lincoln to the Hartford City Hall. Initially, membership was limited to 50 men, but the Hartford group proved so popular that it would eventually boast a membership of more than 500.

The idea spread quickly in 1860, and the Hartford group soon received requests for information. Uniforms of oilcloth capes and caps and torches began selling on the market for about a dollar. By summer many Wide Awake clubs were being formed in the North and Midwest; perhaps as many as 200,000 to 400,000 men became Wide Awakes.

The original group served as the model, and a system of ranks and officers became features of a well-run Wide Awake local. Men with military experience often joined the Wide Awakes, and, as a

result, many clubs were quickly drilled into smart, well-ordered units, marching with all the fanfare and discipline of a military brigade. They would march, sometimes in a zig-zag formation to imitate a split rail fence in honor of Lincoln, and sing specially written campaign songs such as "Lincoln, Pride of the Nation," "The Red, White, and Blue," and "Honest Abe of the West" (sung to the tune of "The Star-Spangled Banner").

Wide Awakes were usually committed volunteers, although sometimes men for hire were paid as much as \$2 to march. They would gather in large numbers—20,000 at an October rally in New York, for example—and carry lanterns or torches atop wooden stakes (sometimes split rails) bearing small American flags. The flags were generally inscribed with the names of Lincoln and Hamlin, and often a local candidate's name as well.

With this Wide Awake fever spreading west, Iowa was not to be left out. Reportedly the first Wide Awake club in Iowa was a Fairfield

group, organized in June 1860 by, among other prominent citizens, state senator and future congressman James F. Wilson. The Fairfield Wide Awakes' purpose, as stated in their constitution, was "supporting the Republican causes and aiding in the election of the Republican ticket, State as well as National." "All young men who are willing to endorse the sentiments of the Republican party . . . and abide by the [Wide Awake] rules and regulations" were invited to join. These rules included holding "himself in readiness to take part in torch-light processions during the Presidential campaign, to perform escort duty, to attend the night meetings and grand rallies of the party, and to act as a Vigilance Committee on election day."

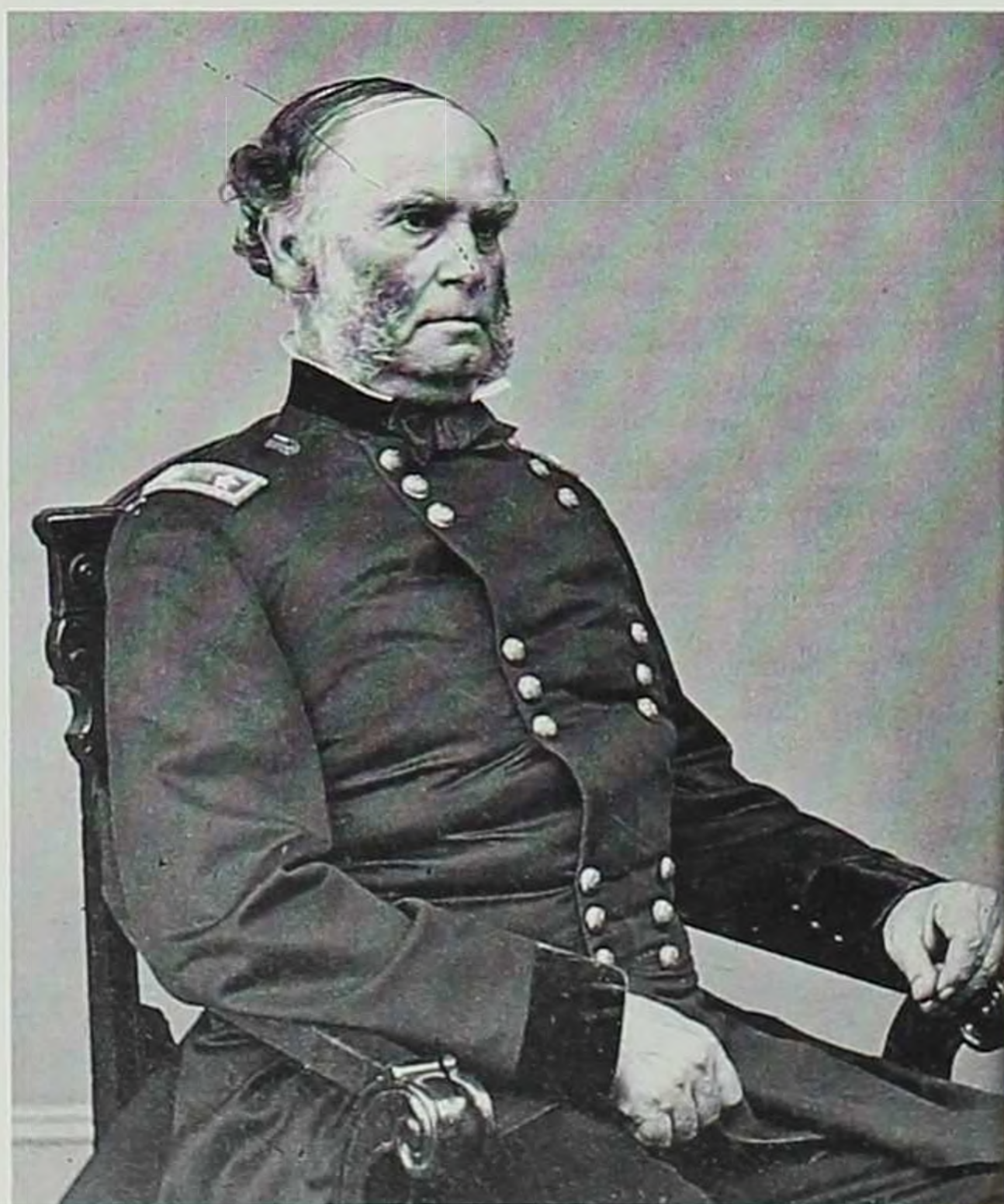
In Fairfield, every member was to pay a \$2 uniform fee or "provide himself with a uniform, consisting of a cap, cloak and torch." According to the *Fairfield Ledger*, the group numbered at least 60 by mid-June. On the 15th they held their first torchlight procession through Fairfield, both "for

their own amusement, and for the purposes of seeing how their uniform suited." (The group had ordered 20 uniforms from Chicago but soon opted for cheaper, better-quality uniforms made locally.)

The procession ended in the Fairfield park, where local co-founder James Wilson urged his group "to be ever on watch, and guard the purity of the ballot-box with unceasing vigilance." Another speaker assured the torch-bearing Wide Awakes that they were indeed "well prepared to meet the enemy" because they could "light the enemy out . . . [or] burn them out . . . [or] smoke them out."

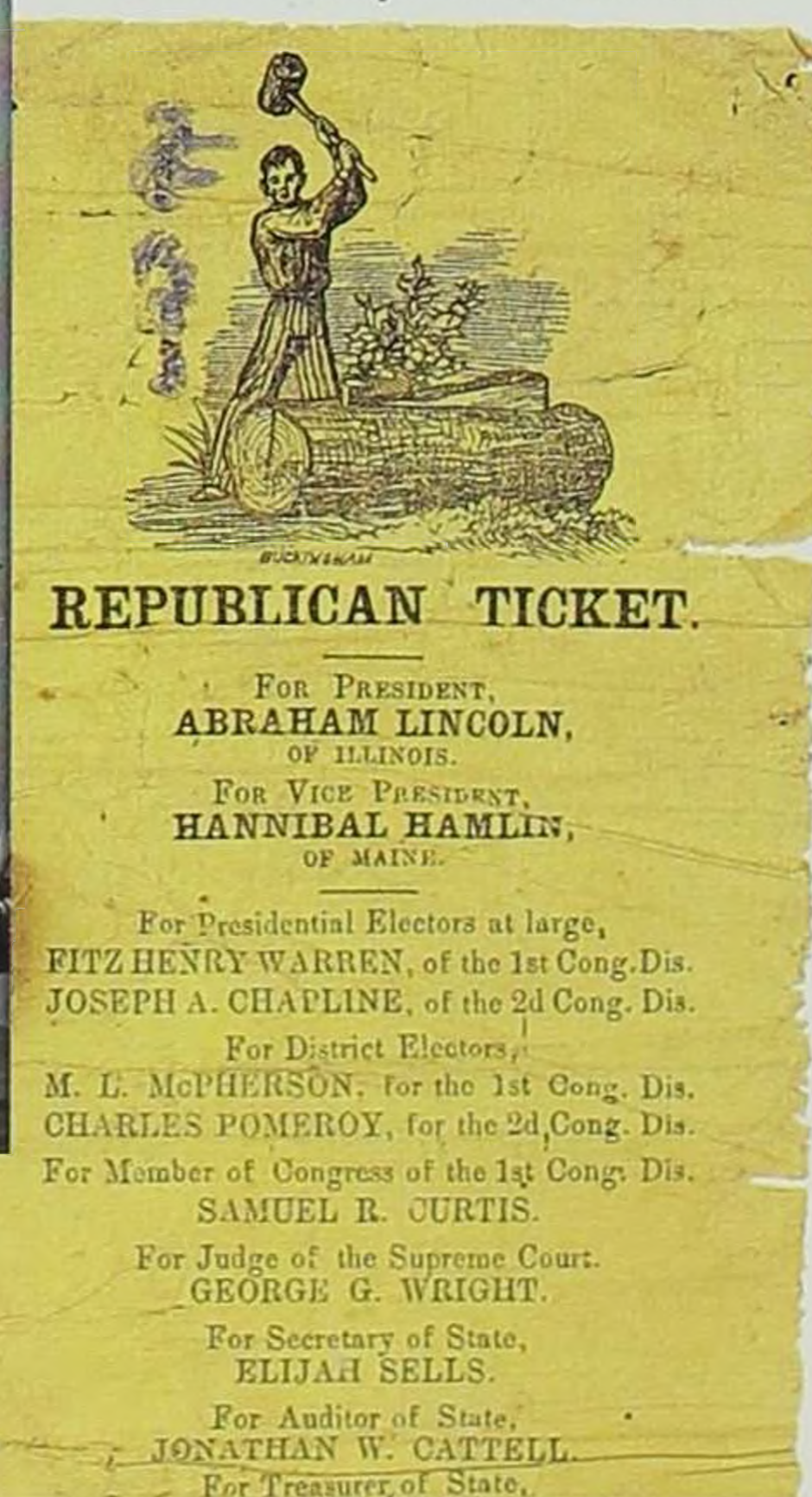
In the strident party loyalty of mid-century, the "enemy" was clearly the political opposition and its citizen support. Throughout the nation, Lincoln's opponents had their own marching groups, for this was also the heyday of political parades. The "Minute Men" and "Little Giants" supported Democratic candidate Stephen Douglas of Illinois, Lincoln's primary foe. One Douglas group, called the "Chloroformers," was said to be dedicated to putting the Wide Awakes to sleep. The remnants of the old Whig Party in coalition with the American Party (or "Know Nothings") organized the "Bell Ringers Union-Sentinels" and "Bell Followers" to support John Bell of Tennessee. (Ironically, the Know Nothings had used the term "Wide Awake" in 1855 in their nativist propaganda.) The secessionist Democrat John Breckenridge of Kentucky had the "National Democratic Volunteers."

In the political give-and-take, sneering Democrats spoke of a sinister purpose behind the Wide Awakes; others called them "unmitigated nuisances," comparing them with the tough gangs of the



PORTRAIT: LIBRARY OF CONGRESS. BALLOT: SHSI (DES MOINES)

Samuel R. Curtis (left) and other candidates are listed on an 1860 Republican ballot.





HARPER'S WEEKLY (OCT. 13, 1860)

Wide Awakes marched in large cities, but also in small towns like Pleasant Plain, Iowa. Here, *Harper's Weekly* depicts a "Grand Procession of Wide-Awakes at New York on the Evening of October 3, 1860." Note **Wide Awake** sign, center front.

day; and jokesters referred to them as the "Sleep Walkers" and the "Fast Asleeps." But the Republicans sneered back. In Iowa, for example, *Fairfield Ledger* editor (and charter member of the local Wide Awakes) W. W. Junkin ridiculed the local Democrats' "True Blues" and their comparatively pathetic parade in early October, in which only half of the 23 True Blues wore uniforms: "They marched around the Park, without their red lights," Junkin noted, "and had a glorious time in the dark."

Throughout the campaign, Junkin's *Fairfield Ledger* would keep his readers well informed about the campaign—from where they could buy Lincoln-Hamlin flags (in his office), to where Wide Awake companies had last paraded with their torchlights. In Iowa's 11 southeastern counties alone, more than 34 communities organized Wide Awake clubs—from South English to Montrose, Muscatine to Bloomfield. *Ledger* accounts, along with those in Keokuk's *Des Moines Valley Whig*, reflect all the political rhetoric and

journalistic exaggeration standard to newspapers then, but they also document campaign styles typical of the mid-19th century—including the popularity of the Wide Awakes in the 1860 election. At three large rallies in particular—in Washington, Keokuk, and Fairfield—Wide Awake companies gathered to light their torches and fuel Iowa's political passions.

"Grand Times at Washington!"

On September 20, Washington, Iowa, hosted what local papers described as the largest public assembly in the community's two-decade history. The *Fairfield Ledger* headlines were giddy: "The Prairies A-Blaze! Grand times at Washington! 10,000 people in council! 800 Wide Awakes in procession! Keep the ball rolling!"

That 10,000 people attended a rally in a town of 2,600 is hardly credible; 19th-century editors no doubt exaggerated such estimates to imply their candidates' strength

and to build bandwagon momentum. In Washington that day, the afternoon stump speeches by prominent public figures would also have built a candidate's momentum, as did the evening torchlight parade. As sky rockets and Roman candles sizzled overhead, more than a dozen Wide Awake companies marched past blazing bonfires and Washington homes "illuminated in honor of the occasion."

Earlier that day, the Fairfield Wide Awakes had led a procession of a hundred wagons into Washington, "where we saw delegations coming from all directions. The ground appeared to be covered with people," the *Ledger* reported. "One wagon attracted great attention. . . . Behind the wagon were chained one yoke of the poorest oxen we ever saw. A board was fastened on their horns labeled 'Poor Kansas'—a reference to the violent conflicts Kansas Territory was weathering over its admission to the Union as a slave or free state.

"On some of the wagons were men busily engaged in carrying on the various trades, blacksmiths, carpenters, tailors coopers, &c.; others were thrashing, mauling rails, &c." the *Ledger* reported. "On [another] wagon were women busily at work, ironing, washing . . . knitting, sewing, darning, churning." These wagons of ordinary people engaged in productive and useful work echoed the "common man" theme used by Lincoln and other politicians in the 19th century.

They also echoed an incident the previous summer in Republican Samuel Kirkwood's campaign for Iowa governor, in which Republicans capitalized on portraying him as a man of the people. As Edgar Harlan recounted in his

Narrative History of the People of Iowa, "A Democratic editor [had] referred to the Republican ticket as the 'Plough-handle ticket,' an epithet intended to cast opprobrium, but instead was accepted by the Republicans as a campaign slogan. . . . [At the last joint debate at Washington] again the Republicans found a way to emphasize the contrast between their candidate [Kirkwood] as a man of the people and [Augustus C.] Dodge as a man of aristocratic associations. The local Democratic committee brought Dodge into town riding in the best carriage that could be found . . . but the crowd had already exhausted their enthusiasm in cheering the appearance of Kirkwood riding to the scene of the meeting

on a hayrack drawn by a team of oxen."

"Great Day for Keokuk!"

The weather was beautiful and clear when, at an early hour, "wagons by the hundred and people by the thousand" converged on Keokuk for a rally October 14. The *Des Moines Valley Whig* reported that many of the day's events were delayed because of the crowds. The train bringing Wide Awakes and their supporters from Fort Madison was late. "Running as fast as the wind would permit," the two ferries across the Mississippi into Keokuk could not keep up with the demand. Standing out from the

throng were a reported 2,500 ardent Wide Awakes, at least 22 companies from the surrounding area, a third of them from Illinois.

As a high wind kicked up clouds of dust on the streets, "the companies marched up Main street," the *Whig* reported. "The Ft. Madison Wide Awakes attracted particular attention. But even they were eclipsed by the beautiful company of handsome young ladies from Denmark [in Lee County] representing the States of the Union. . . . with the wreaths on their heads and the neat little banners in their hands. . . . One young lady was dressed in black, for Kansas, but her banner had the cheering inscription—'I am coming.'"

The *Des Moines Valley Whig* rhapsodized over "the thrilling music of many bands, the firing of cannon, the glitter of twenty-five

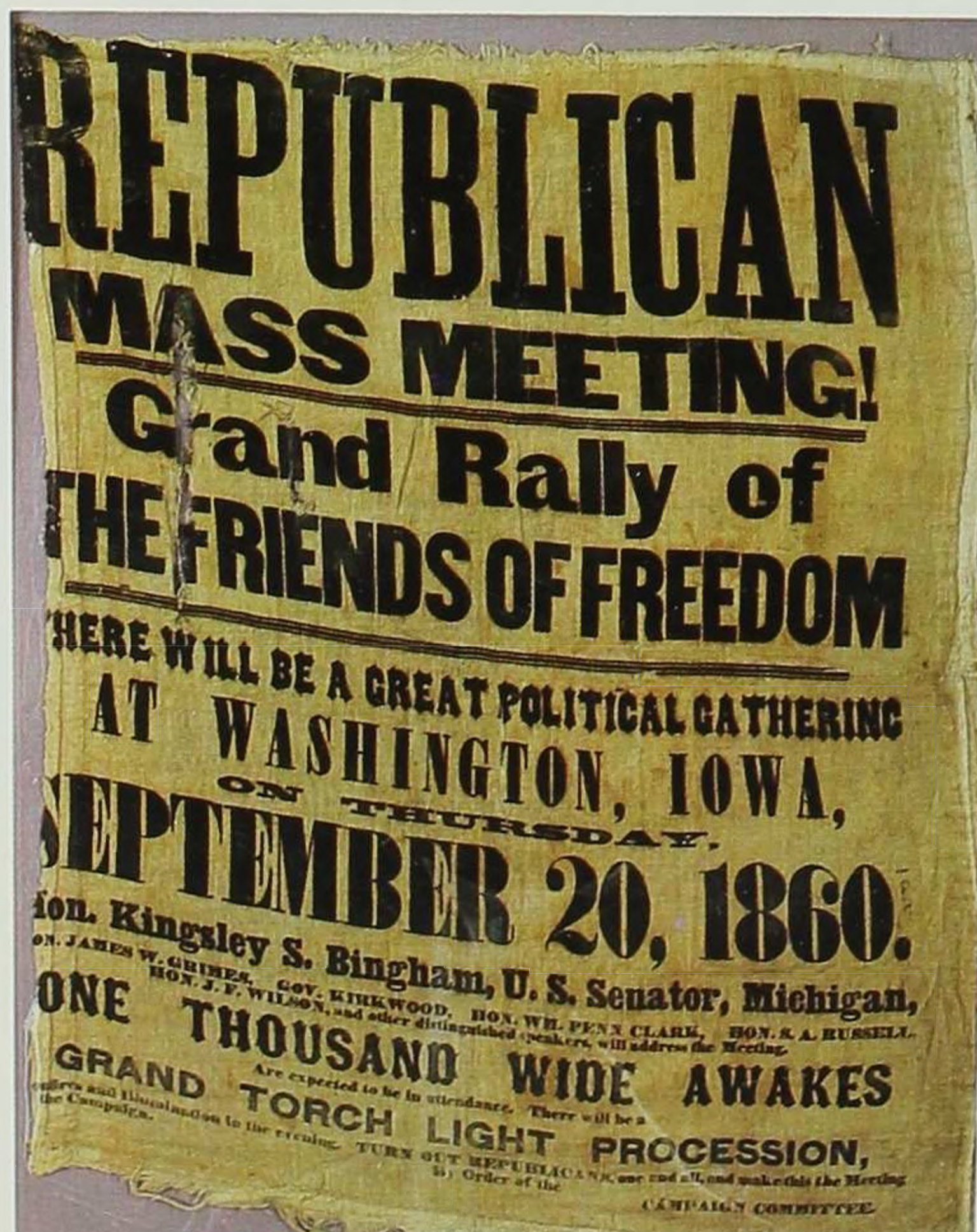
hundred lamps in the sun-light, the waving of innumerable banners and transparencies, and the gorgeously fitted up cars filled with beautiful young ladies." Heading for a gala picnic and stump speeches, the procession marched at noon to a nearby grove. There, perhaps the most exciting speech for those intent on a national sweep was the "glorious news from Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Indiana" of Republican gubernatorial victories at state elections already held.

The high wind had been drowning out many of the speakers, and when a 4 p.m. call came for the Wide Awakes to assemble and march back to town for dinner, the "vast throng" deserted the grove. Having missed a noon meal, many were more eager to eat than to hear the next speech.

With stomachs full and darkness at hand, the Wide Awake companies assembled and strutted about in all their well-drilled fashion, vying for prizes. Fort Madison's Wide Awakes won a banner bearing a life-size likeness of Lincoln; the banner for the largest company went to Wide Awakes from Fountain Green, Illinois. "Main street was made brilliant by the torch lights of the various companies and by abundant fireworks," the *Whig* stated. Although "the high wind blew out many lights and the dust flew uncomfortably, yet the pavements were lined with spectators all the evening."

"Greatest Meeting in Iowa!"

The headline "Ain't You Glad You Joined the Republicans!" on the front page of the October 19 *Fairfield Ledger* set the self-congratulatory mood following Fair-



SHS (DES MOINES)

Cloth poster for 1860 Washington, Iowa, rally lists Wide Awakes' "Grand Torch Light procession" with "Bonfires and Illumination in the evening."

field's rally October 17. The *Ledger* brazenly claimed 25,000 in attendance at Fairfield (its own population only 1,700); "Even our Douglas friends are willing to concede that we had 15,000."

Regardless of the actual numbers, the rally included similar features of previous rallies. Companies of Wide Awakes and other citizen groups arrived by wagon or train. A large wagon with men "engaged in various branches of trade—blacksmithing, carpentering, broom making, sugar making" was again in the procession. Wapello County sent a surprise: "When [the Wide Awakes from Agency City] had formed in procession," the *Ledger* reported, "we discovered a company of lady Wide Awakes, numbering sixty-two. They were dressed in white, with a blue sash around the waist. Each lady wore a jaunty cap, trimmed with ribbon. Each member also carried a pole with a spear on the end of it, and a flag on the pole with the names of Lincoln and Hamlin."

The daytime parade through Fairfield featured banners and effigies, several championing Lincoln at the expense of Stephen Douglas. "On one banner was a horn," the *Ledger* described, "at one end of which was 'Old Abe' with a long rail, punching in the horn, while at the little end of the horn was the head of Douglas, just coming out."

On a Douglas effigy, signs bore the words "I don't care whether slavery is voted up or voted down," and "I've found my Mother, if you don't believe it look at my boots." The boots, the *Ledger* explained, were in "a very dilapidated and much abused condition."

That last political jibe would be unintelligible to anyone who did not know that Douglas, in this

campaign, had broken a long-standing taboo—he campaigned for himself and gave his own stump speeches. According to historian Gil Troy, "Originally, presidential candidates were supposed to 'stand' for election, not 'run.' They did not make speeches. They did not shake hands. They did nothing to betray the slightest ambition for office. Candidates were supposed to stay on their farms in dignified silence, awaiting the people's call, as George Washington had done."

Times were changing, however, and voters were becoming more insistent in their demands that presidential candidates discuss the important issues. Douglas, the most famous orator of his day and genuinely concerned about the country's future, broke with tradition and hit the campaign trail. But he did it surreptitiously, claiming that he was on his way to visit his mother—hence, the worn-out boots and the ridiculed claim. Douglas had made himself a laughingstock and, according to Troy, "By September, Douglas had yet to visit his mother. His opponents circulated an 'ADVERTISEMENT FOR A LOST BOY,' wandering in the Northeast, with a penchant for clambakes." Fairfield's effigy on October 17 (Douglas had decided to actually visit his mother on September 15) was simply a variation on a national joke.

The Fairfield rally followed the usual pattern of parade and political speeches, the speakers' voices carrying well in the clear, warm air. That night, "over 2200 torches were on fire around the Park, presenting a magnificent spectacle.... In every direction could be seen flaming lights. The whole procession reached about one and a half miles around town, and the streets

COME, WIDE-AWAKES!

FROM
Warsaw, Hamilton, Carthage, LaHarp,
Quincy, Burlington, Mt. Pleasant,
Salem, Fairfield, Birmingham,
Keosauqua, Bentonsport,
Farmington, Bloom-
field, Ottumwa,
Ft. Madison,
and from ALL QUARTERS where your
LIGHTS ARE BURNING!

Your Wide-Awake Brethren of Keokuk
WILL TENDER YOU A DINNER.

Come, then, help us put down Buchanan,
Corruption in Office, Peculation on
the Treasury, and Opposition
to Free White Labor.

Let us preserve a soil where such men as
LINCOLN can grow.

**Down with Slavery Extension!! and
Up with the White Man
and his Labor!!**

COMMITTEE OF ARRANGEMENTS
H. B. TEN-EYCK, WM. TIMBERMAN,
T. J. RICE, C. F. DAVIS,
WM. LEIGHTON, ED. J. EGER,
J. A. DURKEE, WM. F. THOMPSON,
R. M. REYNOLDS.
Dr. JAMES J. BRICE, Marshal of the day.

Arrangements have been made with
the Railroads and Steamboats to bring pas-
sengers to this Convention AT HALF FARE.

Wide-Awakes, Attention!

The Wide Awakes of Keokuk will present
a full length portrait of Abe Lincoln to the
best drilled Company of Wide-Awakes, and
another to the largest Company, that will be
present in full uniform at the Republican
Mass Meeting in the City of Keokuk, on the
10th of October next.

Let the Wide-Awakes of Iowa, Illinois
and Missouri turn out in full force, as the
portraits are well worth competing for.

**Hailing Wide Awakes where ever their
"lights are burning," this ad in the Des
Moines Valley Whig promises dinner and
prizes from "your Wide-Awake Breth-
ren of Keokuk."**

of living flame presented the most
imposing exhibition that our citi-
zens ever saw in this place."

At 9 p.m. the procession es-
corted the Wide Awakes to the
trains; other Wide Awakes "were
divided into squads by our citi-
zens" who hosted them overnight.
"Party prejudices were forgotten,"

the *Ledger* reported. "The committee to procure accommodation felt a diffidence in asking Democrats to take and feed the Wide Awakes, but on that day they came forward and nobly assisted the Republicans."

Some Wide Awakes danced until daylight to the Fairfield String Band in Wells' Hall. Even in the morning the Wide Awakes were reluctant to end the political good times. Heading home in their wagons, they turned around and came back to Fairfield. "They felt so good that they could not leave," reported the *Ledger*. "Old men and young men were going round shaking hands, embracing each

other and declaring that they never felt so good in all their lives."

The good feelings apparently continued. On November 2, four days before the national election, Captain R. L. Miller of Keosauqua publicly thanked the Wide Awakes and other Republicans of Fairfield for their hospitality: "May the Republican camp-fires which you have lighted burn brighter and brighter until the light thereof shall break in upon the dark and dimmed vision of every Democrat. . . . May the Republican Thunder . . . roll on and on thick and fast until the 6th of November, with OLD ABE in the Presidential chair, and may it roll, roll, roll for ever. . . . Hurrah for Lincoln, Hamlin, Curtis, Free Speech, Free Homes, Free Labor, and the Union Forever!"

After the election on November 6, the various Wide Awake companies in southeastern Iowa were no doubt jubilant that their torchlight parades had contributed to this "Republican Thunder" rolling Lincoln—and Keokuk's S. R. Curtis—into office. Since July, the Fairfield Wide Awakes alone had logged 237 miles, mostly by wagon, to attend nine meetings outside their community. They had held a dozen torchlight parades in Fairfield, met 22 times for drill and business, spent \$164.50 for "regalia," and burned 60 gallons of kerosene or coal oil. "And certainly," the *Ledger* added proudly in its November 24 wrap-up report, "no company in the State had better music."

"Each Wide Awake should carefully lay aside his torch and cape as fit and honorable memorials of some service rendered his country," the Fairfield report advised. "Though we shall not consider ourselves formally dis-

banded until after 'Old Abe' is [affirmed by the Electoral College and] in the Presidential Chair, we have probably had our last parade. . . . It is pleasing to know that we have closed the campaign so triumphantly, but we cannot refrain from feeling some little regrets at parting."

Torchlight processions, patriotic songs, and stump speeches would continue to characterize American political campaigns through much of the 19th century. But the Wide Awake marching clubs were unique to Lincoln's 1860 campaign. The writer of the Fairfield report probably spoke for thousands of Wide Awakes in "feeling some little regrets at parting," for certainly exuberant political rallies of 1860 fed Americans' appetite for entertainment and camaraderie as much as it fed their passion for politicking. ♦

Collectors and experts on early American photography, authors Floyd and Marion Rinhart have lectured and written extensively on the topic.

NOTE ON SOURCES

Sources used for the Wide Awakes and the 1860 campaign include Melvin L. Hayes, *Mr. Lincoln Runs for President* (1960); J. G. Holland, *Life of Abraham Lincoln* (1866); Reinhard H. Luthin, *The First Lincoln Campaign* (1944); Gerald R. McMurtry, "The Wide Awakes and Their Torch Light Parades," *Lincoln Lore*, Bulletin of the Lincoln National Life Foundation #1572 (Feb. 1969), 3-4; Edward A. Rushford, "Electioneering Without Electricity," *Antiques* (Nov. 1939), 236-39; *Harper's Weekly* (Oct. 13, 1860); and Gil Troy, *See How They Ran: The Changing Role of the Presidential Candidate* (1991). Iowa sources include O. A. Garretson, "A Lincoln Pole Raising," *Palimpsest* (April 1925); Edgar Rubey Harlan, *A Narrative History of the People of Iowa* (1931), I:409; Susan Welty, *A Fair Field* (1968); and the *Des Moines Valley Whig* and *The Fairfield Ledger*, June-Nov. 1860. Lisa Moran, Stephanie Coon, and Jacqueline Smetak researched Iowa sources. Annotations are in the *Iowa Heritage Illustrated* production files.



Oilcloth capes and torches, such as these from State Historical Society of Iowa collections, were used until the turn of the century in campaign parades, long after the Wide Awakes put down their torches for Lincoln.